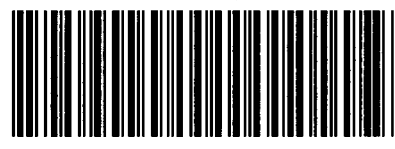


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Why I Teach, Promote, and Love Adolescent Literature: Confessions of a College English Professor

Every day as I arrive at work, I'm aware that I'm a part of the biggest scam in the world: I get paid to teach adolescent literature. I love adolescent literature. As a college professor, I often teach "classic" pieces of literature. For enjoyment, I also read mysteries. But as an avid reader who considers books a necessary part of my life, I read adolescent literature.

Nothing excites me more than to find out that Chris Crutcher (my favorite author, period) is coming out with something new. I still cry when reading the scene in Rodman Philbrick's *Freak the Mighty* when Max learns the real meaning of Kevin's stories; I cheer when Angus, in Crutcher's "A Brief Moment in the Life of Angus Bethune" walks out of the party with Melissa Lafevre; and in Lois Lowry's *The Giver*, when Jonas slides down the last hill toward the bright lights, I pray.

In describing what an author owes his or her readers, Robert Cormier, in his essay, "A Book Is Not a House: The Human Side of Censorship" (1992), quotes the novelist Robert Daly to explain what a novel should do:

The job of a novel at its highest level is to illuminate the human condition. Entertainment is fine and the transference of ideas is nice, too, but the novel, like all art, has as its supreme goal to engage the beholder's emotions, to make him or her laugh and cry and suffer and triumph and—one thing more—understand. (pp. 67–68)

Adolescent literature moves me more consistently than any other genre. Its power to engage my emotions makes me keep coming back for more and does the same thing for students of all ages. Too often, the literature we teach in school only deals with the "transference of ideas" and seldom engages our students' emotions. Ideas are important, but to capture and hold adolescents' attention, literature must grab their emotions.

Adolescents are not as patient in their reading as adults. If a book or story does not catch them in the beginning, they will not read on unless forced. But adolescent readers are savvy about manipulation. Books that dishonestly prey on their emotions are left by the wayside, too. Good adolescent literature does not manipulate.

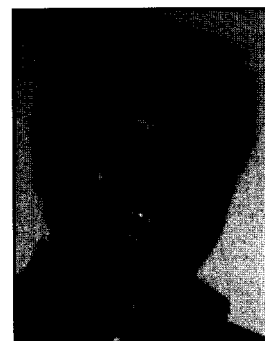
I believe our number one goal in teaching literature should be to create lifelong, reflective readers. To do this, the literature we assign needs to meet all of Daly's criteria. Good adolescent literature does. In Rodman Philbrick's *Freak the Mighty*, Max and Kevin, two eighth-grade outsiders, discover that together they are much more than the freaks the other kids think they are:

Next thing I know, Freak has his hands on my head and he's getting himself on my shoulders and he's tugging at me in a way that I know means "stand up," and so I do it, I stand right up in class and I can see Mrs. Donelli's eyes getting bigger and bigger.

I'm standing there with Freak high above me and it feels right, it makes me feel strong and smart. (pp. 77–78)

In a rousing adventure, Philbrick teaches us what it's like to be painfully different in a world that does not gladly suffer those outside the norm. He shows us that bravery and honor come in all kinds of packages and that the joy and pain of loving someone else are what make us human. The book makes us laugh out loud, cry, and finally, hope.

Christopher Paul Curtis's wonderful first book, *The Watsons Go to Birmingham* (1963), is built around the awful history lesson of how hatred and prejudice lashed out to claim the lives of four little girls. But the novel does much more than give a retelling of that sad day in Birmingham. Instead, Paul takes us into the heart of a loving family that faces the



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Bethune" deal with serious problems that are unfortunately too real for many adolescents. His message of hope is that we are not alone. That no matter how bad we feel, there is always someone who knows how we feel:

"Angus?"
"Yeah?"

"Do you ever get tired of who you are?"

"Do you know who you're talking to?"
"I feel her smile." "Yeah," she says, "I thought so. I know it's not the same, but it's not always so great looking the way I do, either. I pay, too."
"She's right. I think it's not the same."
"Want to know something about me?" she asks, and I think: I'd like to know *anything* about you.
"I'm bulimic. Do you know what that is?"
I smile. "I'm a fat kid with faggot parents who's been in therapy on and off for eighteen years." I say. "Yes, I know what it is. . . ."

"You're the only person I've told except for the people in my therapy group; I just wanted you to know things aren't always as they appear." (pp. 22-23)
Crutcher lets each reader know that he or she is not the only one with problems. Through his characters' strengths, human frailties, sufferings, and strong senses of humor, Crutcher helps his readers understand that the human condition is tragic, comic, sad, and joyous, and shared by all of us. In his essay, "Healing through Literature," he explains why he writes what he does:

Stories can help teenagers look at their feelings, or come to emotional resolution, from a safe distance. If, as an author, I can make an emotional connection with my reader, I have already started to help him or her heal. I have never met a depressed person, or an anxious person, or a fearful person who was not encouraged by the knowledge that others feel the same way they do. *I am not alone* is powerful medicine. If others feel this way, and they have survived, then I can survive too.

These are just a few examples of adolescent literature that meet Daly's exacting criteria. There are many more. Sadly, this fact hasn't moved most teachers to make adolescent literature an integral part of their teaching.

Recently, I was lucky enough to hear Chris Crutcher give a moving speech about his writing. After his talk, I was walking for

horrors of murder with the same wisdom and humor that they use in the normal routines of daily life. Through ten-year-old Kenny and his older brother Byron, we learn what it feels like to have a loved one survive a brush with death and hatred and how love and understanding can heal even a wound this deep:

Byron let go of my ear and thought for a second. "Kenny, things ain't ever going to be fair. How's it fair that two grown men could hate Negroes so much that they'd kill some kids just to stop them from going to school? How's it fair that even though the cops down there might know who did it nothing will probably ever happen to those men? It ain't. But you just gotta understand that that's the way it is and keep on steppin'. . . . You ain't got no cause to be ashamed or scared of nothing. You smart enough to figure this one out yourself. Besides, you getting the word from the top wolf himself: you gonna be all right, baby bruh. I swear for God." (p. 203)

Lois Lowry's *The Giver* subtly explores the human condition by placing the reader in a world where precision in language, the use of drugs to suppress feeling, and culturally entrenched behavioral modification are used to create a very safe, if soulless existence. Perfectly content in this "safe new world," twelve-year-old Jonas never questions the wisdom of his society's rules until he is chosen to be the new Receiver, the person who will hold the entire society's memories and emotions. As the old Receiver trains Jonas by giving both good and bad memories that carry with them physical and emotional feelings, Jonas learns the price he and the others have paid for their safety—the loss of all feelings, the loss of love:

"Giver," Jonas suggested, "you and I don't need to *care* about the rest of them."
The Giver looked at him with a questioning smile. Jonas hung his head. Of course they needed to care. It was the meaning of everything. (pp. 156-157)

Lowry's carefully crafted writing puts us in Jonas's mind and heart as he questions what is right and what it is to be human. Part of the humanness of adolescence is the feeling of being alone. Each adolescent feels that no one really knows what it's like to be him or her. Chris Crutcher's characters in "A Brief Moment in the Life of Angus

the door when I heard a high school teacher bemoan the fact that Crutcher's kind of literature was replacing the nobility of the "classics" in middle and high school classrooms. Biting my lip, I wanted to tell her that I have good and bad news for her.

The good news (for her) is that the "classics" still reign unchallenged in most English classrooms (Applebee). The bad news is that, as a teacher of freshman composition and literature, I can report that a majority of our best students enter college viewing literature with the same excitement as they would a Lawrence Welk marathon. Most of these students come to my classes from school systems where I have supervised student teachers, so I have a good handle on what literature is being taught in those schools, and with few exceptions, adolescent literature is absent from their English classes. And students are paying the price. Being forced to read so-called "great literature" (the "classics") before they are ready for it has taught them that literature is something to be endured and almost never enjoyed.

Lack of experience with literature that is both well written and developmentally appropriate causes them to read literature like they would a newspaper. They search for important facts that they can regurgitate on tests so that they can get through the last literature class they will ever have to take. They are almost never moved by what they read. They rarely incorporate the characters' experiences and discoveries into their own hearts or minds. They don't believe those who tell them that they are missing something. They don't understand that what they are missing is important, vital, maybe even essential.

This is a tragedy, a tragedy that could be avoided if we as teachers expose our students to books and stories and poems that will "... engage the beholder's emotions, to make him or her laugh and cry and suffer and triumph and—one thing more—understand" (Cormier, p. 68). Good adolescent literature, like all good literature, does these things. Unlike the "classics," adolescent literature does it in such a way that adolescents will ask for more, and that is the acid test. When your students finish a good adolescent novel or story, there is a good chance that they will ask you, "Do you have anything else like this?" When is the last time they asked the same thing after reading Dickens, or Hawthorne, or Shakespeare?

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